

Christian Initiation

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.12>

Published online: 02 March

2015

Summary

“Christian initiation” refers to the ritual process employed by various churches in forming new Christian converts through catechesis (instruction) during the “catechumenate” to baptism, postbaptismal rites (including hand-laying and anointing, sometimes called “confirmation”), culminating in First Communion, and leading to the further integration of these newly initiated members into ongoing Christian life through “mystagogy.” Christian initiation is the story of diversity and change as the biblical images of initiation lead toward a rich variety of early Christian practices and theological interpretations, eventually coming to focus on Christian baptism as “new birth” or the “washing of regeneration” in water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5 and Titus 3:5) in early Syria and Egypt and baptism as participation in the death and burial of Christ (Rom. 6) in North Africa and other places in the West.

In the 4th and 5th centuries, after Christianity emerged as a *cultus publicus*, the rites of Christian initiation underwent a certain standardization and cross-fertilization as various churches borrowed from one another to construct rites that display a remarkable degree of homogeneity. These rites include a decided preference for celebrating Christian initiation at Easter, after a period of final catechetical preparation in Lent; prebaptismal rites with an exorcistic focus; an almost universal (Rom. 6) theological interpretation of baptism; and postbaptismal hand-layings or anointings associated explicitly with the gift or “seal” of the Holy Spirit, still leading to First Communion within a unitive and integral process. Another characteristic, thanks to the controversies faced by Augustine with Pelagianism, was the development of a new theological rationale for the initiation of infants, which focused on the inheritance of “original sin” from Adam. This would have far-reaching consequences for subsequent centuries as infant baptism became the norm for practice and theology.

If the Eastern rites underwent little further development in the Middle Ages, the West experienced what many have been called a sacramental dissolution,

disintegration, and separation. Gradually, the postbaptismal rites of hand-laying and anointing, associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit and now with the physical presence of the bishop, became separated from infant baptism and were given at a later point. Similarly, the reception of First Communion also became separated and was often postponed until the canonical age of seven. This process was inherited by the adherents of the Protestant and Catholic reformations of the 16th century. Little was done to restore the unitive and integral process of Christian initiation from the earlier centuries and confirmation itself developed among the reformers largely into a catechetical exercise or rite with First Communion either prior to or after confirmation.

In the early 21st century, thanks to the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and similar rites in other churches, the unitary and integral process of initiation has been restored. What remains to be done, however, is the full integration of infants and children into this process, although in several Anglican and Lutheran contexts infants now are again recipients of the full rites of initiation, including First Communion.

Keywords: [Anointing](#), [baptism](#), [catechesis](#), [catechumenate](#), [confirmation](#), [First Communion](#), [initiation](#), [mystagogy](#)

The First Three Centuries

Based on Jesus' baptism by John (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11, Luke 3:21–22; and John 1:31–34), possibly on Jesus' own baptismal practice (John 3:22, 26, and 4:1), and in general continuity with the overall context of ritual washings and bathing customs within 1st-century Judaism,¹ new converts to Christianity were initiated into Christ and the Christian Church by a ritual process that included some form of baptism with water, a process that would eventually come to be based in the command of the risen Jesus (Matt. 28:19). Unfortunately, the New Testament itself records little detail about this baptismal practice or what additional ceremonies may have been included. While we might assume that some kind of profession of faith in Jesus as Lord was present, we do not know, for example, if any particular "formula," for example, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" from the dominical command for baptism in Matthew 28:19 or "in the name of Jesus" (Acts 3:6), was employed. Nor do we know precisely how baptisms were regularly conferred (by immersion, complete submersion, or pouring), whether infants were ever candidates for baptism during the New Testament period, what kind of preparation may have preceded adult baptism, whether anointings were already part of the process, or if occasional references to the apostolic conferral of the postbaptismal gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8 and 19) were regular features of baptismal practice in some early communities or exceptional cases due to particular situations. For that matter, a study of foot washing in the Gospel of John has suggested that among some early Johannine communities it was not baptism at all but a foot-washing ceremony that constituted the "rite" of Christian initiation.²

What the New Testament does provide is a rich mosaic of baptismal images, including: forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); new birth

through water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5; Titus 3:5–7); putting off of the “old nature” and “putting on the new,” that is, “being clothed in the righteousness of Christ” (Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:9–10); initiation into the “one body” of the Christian community (1 Cor. 12:13; see also Acts 2:42); washing, sanctification, and justification in Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:11); enlightenment (Heb. 6:4; 10:32; 1 Pet. 2:9); being anointed and/or “sealed” by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21–22; 1 John 2:20, 27); being sealed or marked as belonging to God and God’s people (2 Cor. 1:21–22; Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30; Rev. 7:3); and, of course, being joined to Christ through participation in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–11; Col. 2:12–15). Two of these will stand out with particular emphasis: Christian initiation as new birth through water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5ff.) and Christian initiation as being united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–11). Around these, several of the other New Testament images will eventually cluster as specific baptismal “ceremonies.”

Our earliest extra-biblical sources for the rites of Christian initiation provide only a few more, albeit important, details. Dating from the late 1st or early 2nd centuries, chapter 7 of the (probably Syrian) proto-church order called the *Didache* directs that, after instruction (presumably the kind of ethical formation supplied by chapters 1–6 of the document) and one or two days of fasting on the part of the candidates, baptizers, and community alike, baptism is to be conferred in cold running (i.e., “living”) water. The *Didache* instructs that if running water is unavailable, then other water is to be poured over the head of the candidate, accompanied by the trinitarian formula of Matthew 28:19. Only the baptized, we are instructed further in chapter 9, are to receive the Eucharist.

In the middle of the 2nd century at Rome, chapters 61 and 65 of the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr not only corroborate the information provided by the *Didache*, but also add some other elements:

Those who are convinced and believe what we say and teach is the truth, and pledge themselves to be able to live accordingly, are taught in prayer and fasting to ask God to forgive their past sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated. In the name of God, the Father and Lord of all, and of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. For Christ said: “Unless you be born again, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (John 3:5). ... In order that we do not continue as children of necessity and ignorance, but of deliberate choice and knowledge, and in order to obtain in the water the forgiveness of past sins, there is invoked over the one who wishes to be regenerated, and who is repentant of his sins, the name of God, the Father and Lord of all. ... This washing is called illumination, since they who learn these things become illuminated intellectually. Furthermore, the illuminated one is also baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, who predicted through the prophets everything concerning Jesus. (chap. 61)

After thus baptizing the one who has believed and given his assent, we escort him to the place where are assembled those whom we call brethren, to offer up sincere prayers in common for ourselves, for the baptized person, and for all other persons wherever they may be, in order that, since we have found the truth, we may be deemed fit through our actions to be esteemed as good citizens and observers of the law, and thus attain eternal salvation. At the conclusion of prayers we greet one

another with a kiss. Then, bread and chalice containing wine mixed with water are presented to the one presiding over the brethren. (chap. 65)³

Because Justin refers in the above description to what may be called “creedal” language, it is not clear if a baptismal formula is intended or if he is alluding to an early example of the *Western* threefold profession of faith as constituting the “formula” of baptism. At the same time, while it is often assumed that Justin describes *Roman* liturgical practice, his theology of baptism as “new birth” and his reference to baptism as “enlightenment,” characteristic emphases in the Christian East, may reflect an *Eastern* Christian tradition (Justin, after all, was from Flavia Neapolis in Syria) or, possibly, a Syrian community at Rome. Nevertheless, the overall ritual pattern described by him underscores that some kind of “catechesis” (instruction) preceded baptism and that this entire process of becoming a Christian culminated in the sharing in the prayers, kiss, and Eucharist of the community.

It is only in the early 3rd century that a more complete picture of the variant processes of early Christian initiation begins to emerge, along with detailed evidence of several additional ritual elements. But the extent to which any of these elements are present varies according to liturgical tradition.

In early Syrian documents—the *Didascalia Apostolorum* and the *Syrian Acts of the Apostles*—a pattern of initiation appears to exist wherein the baptism of Jesus is seen as the primary paradigm for Christian baptism and the theology of baptism flows from the “new birth” focus of John 3. While these documents place minimal stress on catechesis, a strong emphasis is placed on a prebaptismal anointing of the head (and, eventually, the whole body), interpreted as a royal anointing by which the Holy Spirit assimilates the candidate to the kingship and priesthood of Christ; baptism accompanied by the Matthean trinitarian formula; and the concluding reception of the Eucharist.⁴ It is also possible, but by no means proven, that one of the principal occasions for initiation in the early Syrian tradition was January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany, interpreted, primarily, as the Feast of Jesus’ baptism. Several scholars have also suggested that early Egyptian initiation practice provides a close parallel to that of Syria in this time period,⁵ although in Egypt it appears that candidates for baptism may have been enrolled on Epiphany and then baptized forty days later, with catechetical instruction given during a fast associated with Jesus’ own forty-day fast in the wilderness.⁶

Western sources of the 3rd century provide alternative patterns to the early Syrian, and possibly Egyptian, practice. In North Africa, Tertullian’s *De baptismo* (c. 200) describes a ritual process which included “frequent” prebaptismal vigils and fasts, a renunciation of Satan, a threefold creedal profession of faith in the context of the conferral of baptism, a postbaptismal “christic” anointing related to priesthood, a hand-laying “blessing” associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and participation in the Eucharist, which also included the reception of milk and honey as symbols of entering into the “promised land.”⁷ Tertullian’s description is corroborated generally a bit later in North Africa by Cyprian of Carthage⁸ and, for Rome, presumably, in the *Apostolic Tradition* (c. 215) ascribed to Hippolytus of Rome.⁹

According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, prebaptismal catechesis was to last for “three years” and included frequent prayer, fasting, and exorcism, with entrance into the catechumenate itself accompanied by a detailed interrogation of the motives and

life styles of those seeking admittance. For those eventually elected to baptism, the rites themselves took place at an all-night vigil, and they consisted of a renunciation of Satan; an anointing with the “oil of exorcism”; a threefold, creedal interrogation accompanied by the three immersions of baptism itself; a postbaptismal anointing by a presbyter with the “oil of thanksgiving”; an entrance into the assembly, where the bishop performed a hand-laying with prayer and a second anointing; and, after the kiss, the sharing of the Eucharist, including the cup(s) of milk and honey referred to by Tertullian. Since authorship, date, provenance, and influence of this church order have been challenged by contemporary scholarship, the details provided by it must be received with due caution. It is possible that several of these elements, for example, the “three-year catechumenate” and the episcopal anointing, reflect later (4th-century) additions or interpolations.¹⁰ Nevertheless, although the earliest extant text of the *Apostolic Tradition* (mid-5th century in Latin) does not interpret the bishop’s hand-laying prayer and anointing as “giving” the Holy Spirit, subsequent versions of the document will do precisely that and, at least at Rome, the association of these episcopal acts with the conferral of the Holy Spirit will become a characteristic emphasis.

Along with these specific ritual details, 3rd-century sources also show that infant baptism, including infant communion, was being practiced widely. Tertullian strongly cautions against it (*De baptismo* 18). Origen calls it an “apostolic custom” (*Commentary on Romans*, 5, 9). The *Apostolic Tradition* makes provision for those “who cannot answer for themselves.” And Cyprian gives a theological defense based on the inheritance of the “disease of death” from Adam (*Ep.* 64). Similarly, Tertullian is the first author to express a preference for initiation taking place either at Easter or during the fifty days of Easter (“for then was accomplished our Lord’s passion, and into it we are baptized.”¹¹) It may be that something similar is intended in the *Apostolic Tradition*, but since this document only refers to initiation at a Saturday, or possibly even a Friday night vigil, there is no compelling reason to assume that it is the Easter vigil which is meant.

The 4th and 5th Centuries

As a result of sweeping political and social changes in the wake of Constantine’s own conversion, including the subsequent legalization and eventual adoption of Christianity as the official religion or *cultus publicus* of the Roman Empire, and the Trinitarian and Christological decisions of the first ecumenical councils, several developments in the practice of Christian initiation occurred during the 4th and 5th centuries. Thanks to the extant catechetical homilies of the great “mystagogues” (e.g., Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia for the East and Ambrose of Milan for the West), the practices of Christian initiation in this period are easily reconstructed.¹² While some local diversity continued to exist, the following came to characterize the overall pattern in the Christian East: (1) the adoption of Paschal Baptism and the now forty-day season of Lent as the time of prebaptismal (daily) catechesis on Scripture, Christian life, and the Creed for the *photizomenoi* (those to be “enlightened”); (2) the use of scrutinies (examinations) and daily exorcisms throughout the period of final baptismal preparation; (3) the development of specific rites called *apotaxis* (renunciation) and *syntaxis* (adherence) as demonstrating a “change of ownership” for the candidates; (4) the development of ceremonies such as the

solemn *traditio* and *redditio symboli* (the presentation and “giving back” of the Nicene Creed); (5) the interpretation of the prebaptismal anointing as a rite of exorcism, purification, and/or preparation for combat against Satan; (6) the rediscovery and use of Romans 6 as the dominant paradigm for interpreting the baptismal immersion as entrance into the “tomb” with Christ; (7) the introduction of a postbaptismal anointing associated with the gift and “seal” of the Holy Spirit; and (8) the use of Easter week as a time for “mystagogical catechesis” (an explanation of the sacramental “mysteries” the newly initiated had experienced).

Although a similar overall pattern also existed in the West, Western sources display some significant differences. Ambrose of Milan, for example, witnesses to a postbaptismal rite of foot washing (*pedilavium*) as an integral component of baptism.¹³ Some sources from Rome (e.g., the *Letter of John the Deacon to Senarius*)¹⁴ and North Africa (Augustine)¹⁵, indicate the presence of three public scrutinies (including even physical examinations) held on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. And, thanks to the important 5th-century letter from Pope Innocent I to Decentius of Gubbio,¹⁶ it is clear that at Rome itself the pattern of episcopal hand-laying with prayer and second postbaptismal anointing, noted already in the *Apostolic Tradition*, was understood as an essential aspect and was associated explicitly with the bishop’s prerogative in “giving” the Holy Spirit.

The adoption of several of these ceremonies for the preparation and initiation of candidates was, undoubtedly, the result of the Christian Church seeking to ensure that its sacramental life would continue to have some kind of integrity when, in a changed social and cultural context, where Christianity was now favored by the emperor, authentic conversion and properly motivated desire to enter the Christian community could no longer be assumed. Indeed, as the experience of Augustine himself demonstrates (*Confessions* 1.11), it became common in some places to enroll infants in the catechumenate and then postpone their baptism until much later in life, if ever. Similarly, as the rites themselves take on numerous elements, which heightened dramatically the experience of those being initiated, the overall intent was surely to impress upon them the seriousness of the step they were taking.¹⁷

It is not, however, only the baptismal candidates who regularly experienced this process. Egeria, the late-4th-century Spanish pilgrim to Jerusalem, records in her travel diary that, along with the candidates and their sponsors, members of the faithful also filled the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem for the daily catechetical lectures of the bishop. “At ordinary services when the bishop sits and preaches,” she writes, “the faithful utter exclamations, but when they come and hear him explaining the catechesis, their exclamations are louder ...; and ... they ask questions on each point.” Further, during the week of mystagogy she notes that the applause of the newly baptized and faithful “is so loud that it can be heard outside the church.” Because of this, she states that “all the people in these parts are able to follow the Scriptures when they are read in church.”¹⁸

Designed for adult converts, the ritual process of Christian initiation in these several sources was to be short lived, due, in part, to its success in “converting” the masses. The North African controversy between “Pelagianism” and Augustine over the long-standing practice of infant initiation, and Augustine’s theological rationale for infant initiation based on a theology of “original sin,” however, would lead to the catechumenate’s further decline. At the same time, Augustine’s lengthy battle with “Donatism” over the Donatist practice of “rebaptizing”

Catholics and their insistence on the moral character of the baptizer in assuring the valid administration of baptism, would lead also to an “orthodox” sacramental theology based on the use of proper elements and words with Christ himself underscored as the true sacramental minister. If Augustine himself knew an initiation rite similar to those summarized above,¹⁹ his own theological emphases, born in the heat of controversy, would set the agenda for a later Western-medieval sacramental minimalism focused on “matter” and “form,” the *quamprimum* (“as soon as possible”) baptism of infants, and an objective sacramental validity ensured by an *ex opere operato* understanding.

The Western Middle Ages

If the Eastern rites underwent little further development in the Middle Ages, the West experienced what has been called a sacramental dissolution, disintegration, and separation.²⁰ Even in the East, however, it is important to note that, while eventually all of the rites would locate or shift the ritualization of the initiatory Spirit gift to a postbaptismal location, with prebaptismal rites becoming exorcistic and preparatory in nature, evidence of the other pattern and interpretation is still discernable in eastern Syrian sources (Aphrahat and Ephrem) until the 7th century, where the ritual pneumatic focus remains on the prebaptismal anointing and theology of new birth and adoption remains normative.²¹

In the West, the postbaptismal rites of hand-laying and anointing, now associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit and with the physical presence of the bishop (thanks to the letter of Pope Innocent I to Decentius), gradually became separated from infant baptism and given at a later point. Similarly, the reception of First Communion also became separated and often postponed until the canonical age of seven.

At Rome itself, however, the unitary and integral process still associated officially, at least, with the Easter Vigil, and known clearly from the 7th-century *Gelasian Sacramentary* (a book containing the necessary prayers for the celebration of the sacraments²²) and *Ordo Romanus XI* (containing rubrical and ceremonial directions corresponding to the *Gelasian Sacramentary*²³) continued into the 12th century. Of particular note is that in the *Gelasian Sacramentary* the hand-laying prayer for the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit (see Isa. 11:2) is connected explicitly with the “consignation,” but the subsequent anointing by the bishop at the end of the prayer is Christological in content (“the sign of Christ unto eternal life”). In the later Roman *Pontificals* (liturgical books for bishops), the episcopal anointing itself will gradually assume the ritual weight of this process and come to be seen as the “matter” of the “sacrament of confirmation” with the “form” now consisting of the formula: “I sign you with the sign of the cross and confirm you with the chrism of salvation. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”²⁴ In this context, while the hand-laying prayer continued to reference the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit, the ritual gesture accompanying this prayer was no longer a literal laying on of a hand or hands but was prayed now as the bishop’s hands were extended over the candidates collectively. But sometimes during the anointing the bishop laid his right hand on the head of the candidate and, hence, hand-laying and anointing were combined.

If at Rome what became a delay between baptism, still for a time including the reception of Holy Communion, with confirmation supplied by the bishop, was kept

as short as possible do the greater availability of bishops there, elsewhere, as the Roman Rite was increasingly adapted under Charlemagne, this delay and separation increased. Prior to this, as available sources show for elsewhere in Europe,²⁵ the rites of Christian initiation appear not to have contained this unique Roman postbaptismal ceremony at all, but they constituted full rites of initiation consisting of baptism, anointing, foot-washing, and a concluding prayer without any ritual gesture attached.²⁶ Similarly, within various 5th-century local conciliar decrees from both France and Spain one encounters the terminology of *confirmare* (“to confirm”) and *perficere* (“to perfect”) to refer to something apparently “done” by the bishop apart from the baptismal rite that serves to “complete” baptism. But anachronism in interpreting this terminology must be avoided. That is, as Gabriele Winkler demonstrated, such practices called *confirmare* and *perficere* in these conciliar decrees do not appear to be regular parts of the rites of Christian initiation; rather, they constituted episcopal actions done in extraordinary or irregular situations (e.g., after “emergency baptisms,” at the reconciliation of heretics, or in those situations where chrism had not obtained from the bishop by presbyters prior to conferring baptism). In addition, Winkler argued that a reference to *in confirmatione* (“at confirmation”) in canon 2 of Orange was not necessarily a reference to an episcopal “rite” at all but to the bishop “confirming” the local ministries of presbyters during his pastoral visits.²⁷ Nevertheless, in a famous Pentecost homily, widely attributed now to a 5th-century Semi-Pelagian heretic, Faustus of Riez, a connection to the word *confirmation* is made between a now separated episcopal rite of hand-laying for the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he explains in the following manner:

What the imposition of the hand bestows in confirming individual neophytes, the descent of the Holy Spirit gave people then in the world of believers ... the Holy Spirit, who descends upon the waters of baptism by a salvific falling, bestows on the font a fullness toward innocence, and presents in confirmation an increase for grace. And because in this world we who will be prevailing must walk in in every age between invisible enemies and dangers, we are reborn in baptism for life, and we are confirmed after baptism for the strife. In baptism we are washed; after baptism we are strengthened.²⁸

At about the same time Jerome, secretary to Pope Damasus, witnesses to a practice he has heard of regarding some bishops in rural areas going about in order to “lay hands on neophytes,” a practice he believes has more to do with episcopal honors than with the principle of necessity.²⁹

Faustus’s homily would come to play a major role in the West. His words about “confirmation” were later attributed to a fictitious pope named Melchisedes and were cited as such in a collection of forged papal documents known as the *False Decretals*. In the Middle Ages, however, these *Decretals* were recognized as authentic and from them Faustus’s words would pass into what is known as the *Decretum* of Gratian, a 12th-century legal document, that was to serve as the foundation for canon law in the medieval period. From there Peter the Lombard incorporated Faustus’s interpretation of “confirmation” into his famous *Sentences*. And it was Lombard’s *Sentences* that would serve as the basic introductory textbook for the study of theology throughout the Middle Ages. Not surprisingly, then, it is on the basis of Lombard’s *Sentences* that Thomas Aquinas can write in his own important and highly influential *Summa Theologiae*:

People also receive a spiritual life through baptism, which is spiritual regeneration. But in confirmation people receive as it were a certain mature age of spiritual life. For this reason, Pope Melchiades says, “The Holy Spirit who descends upon the waters of baptism in a salvific falling bestows on the font a fullness toward innocence. In confirmation it presents an increase for grace. In baptism we are reborn for life. After baptism we are strengthened.” And therefore it is clear that confirmation is a special sacrament.³⁰

This development of confirmation as a sacrament of strength and an increase of grace by the Holy Spirit, separate from baptism, must also be seen in relationship to the dominance of infant baptism and changes in Eucharistic reception and overall piety. That is, Augustine’s emphasis on “original sin” as a rationale for infant initiation becomes increasingly from the 9th century on a principle mandating infant baptism as soon as possible after birth (*quam primum*). Similarly, after Lateran Council IV in 1215 linked the reception of Holy Communion with confession for those at the age of reason (generally understood as age seven), a separation of years between infant baptism and First Communion also developed. And, it is important to note that the sacrament of confirmation itself was apparently rather widely neglected as well. Gerard Austin, in fact, says that frequent diocesan and synodical legislation throughout medieval Europe about the necessity of having children confirmed by age one, three, seven, and/or ten demonstrates that such was not happening and that, as a result, confirmation became the “neglected sacrament.”³¹ The end result of all this is that the earlier process of infant initiation both in East and West became infant baptism alone in the West, a reduced and compressed rite more often than not celebrated in private rather than as part of the public liturgical life of the Church. What the earlier churches of both East and West kept together in a unitary and integral rite, the western Middle Ages, to paraphrase the marriage rite, “rent asunder” into four separate and distinct sacraments:

1. Baptism in infancy, with the postbaptismal anointing, with chrism given by a priest
2. First Confession at age seven in preparation for First Communion
3. First Communion
4. Confirmation by a bishop at age seven (or later), either before or after First Communion, depending upon the availability of the bishop and the responsibility of parents and parish clergy

In such a way, infant baptism was to become little more than a solemn “operation on the child,”³² a solemn exorcism designed to rid the child from his or her inherited original sin, or, given its close association to birth, a “naming ceremony” for the child (“christening”). With regard to this, Mark Searle was certainly correct in noting:

What is not always recognized is that with this unwitting change of policy, the Western Church gave up trying to initiate infants. ... Instead of initiating infants, as had been the universal policy of the first millennium or more, the Church now put them on hold—baptizing them as a *precautionary measure*—until they came of age. ... The net result is that, beginning in the late thirteenth century and universally from the sixteenth, the Roman Catholic Church has really only initiated 'adults,' even though it continued to baptize the newborn as a precautionary measure within a few hours or days of birth.³³

The Protestant and Catholic Reformations

The pattern of Christian initiation in its disordered and separated sequence, as it had come to be celebrated and interpreted throughout the medieval West, would be inherited by all of those Western churches that owe their immediate origins to the 16th-century Protestant and Catholic Reformations. Among the various Protestant Reformation traditions, with the exception of the Anabaptists, the baptism of infants was maintained and defended, although the rites themselves varied greatly, according to the liturgical products of the various reformers.³⁴ Lutheran and Anglican baptismal rites, that is, Luther's *Taufbüchleinen* of 1523 and 1526, and Thomas Cranmer's *Books of Common Prayer* of 1549 and 1552, tended to be on the conservative side with the retention of many of the ceremonies contained in the medieval rites they had inherited (e.g., the baptismal garment, lighted candle, and, at least in their earlier versions, anointing). Those within the Reformed tradition of Germany and Switzerland, however, most notably Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, tended toward a greater minimalism in ritual, eventually retaining only the baptismal washing with the recited formula, though within a context of public exhortation and instruction in the meaning of the rite.

Of particular interest is the fact that Protestant reformers such as Luther and Calvin preferred that the baptism of infants be administered by full immersion or submersion as a more complete sign or "visible word" of what baptism signified (i.e., death, burial, and resurrection in Christ). And, thanks to the Swiss reformer Martin Bucer (1491–1551), who was also to become a strong influence on Thomas Cranmer, the Reformed tradition stressed that baptisms be public events celebrated within the context of corporate worship. Such a development entailed a significant departure from the privatized administration of baptism in the late medieval period.

While liturgical variety certainly existed within the various branches of the Magisterial Protestant Reformation, there was a strong theological agreement among them against the approach of the Anabaptists, sometimes called the "Radical Reformation," and associated with leaders such as Thomas M \ddot{u} nzer, Balthasar H \ddot{u} bmaier, and Menno Simons. The Anabaptists held what is often called a rather "sectarian" view of Christianity vis-à-vis both church and state, and in their communities infant baptism was not practiced. Rather, although infants might be "dedicated" to God in a ceremony, baptism was postponed until conscious faith and conversion were attained and one could thus make a personal decision to accept and follow Christ. The rite of baptism itself, then, was a consequence of this decision and done in obedience to Christ's baptismal "ordinance" or command as a public witness or testimony to that decision, often administered around age seven and including the reception of Holy Communion. Because infant baptism was not considered to be true baptism, it also became a common practice that those who had already been baptized in infancy within Roman Catholicism, or now in a new Protestant liturgical tradition, would be rebaptized when they had experienced this necessary adult conversion to Christ. Of course, the Anabaptists did not see this as "rebaptism" at all, but as the true and only baptism. Within this theological position, rightly or wrongly, the other reformers perceived that the Anabaptists had exchanged an Augustinian theology of salvation rooted in the richness of God's grace for a form of Pelagianism, which emphasized baptism as a human rather than divine act and as the consequence of a deliberate, free, and salvific choice or human decision rather than the choice of

One of the great ironies of the Protestant Reformation is that, in spite of the reformers' unanimous deletion of confirmation from the list of sacraments in the Church, Lutheranism, Reformed Protestantism, and Anglicanism all ended up with some form of "confirmation" as a preliminary rite leading to the reception of First Communion. This becomes all the more ironic when the severe and harsh criticisms of confirmation raised especially by Luther and Calvin in their anti-Roman polemics are noted. According to Luther, the sacrament and rite of confirmation as it existed in the late medieval Church was nothing more than *Affenspiel* ("monkey business"), *Lügentand* ("fanciful deception"), and *Gaukelwerk* ("mumbo jumbo")³⁶. Calvin's assault on confirmation was even stronger: "I regard it as one of the most deadly wiles of Satan."³⁷

Because Reformers such as Calvin and Bucer believed that a purer form of confirmation once existed in early Christianity by which an adolescent, having been baptized in infancy, was examined according to the faith of the Church, and then confirmed by the laying on of hands in blessing, under the influence of Bucer, the "Father of Protestant Confirmation," various Protestant rites for confirmation developed in especially the Lutheran and Anglican traditions. Now based firmly on the candidate's being instructed in the various catechisms being produced (c.f., Luther's *Small Catechism* of 1529 and the catechisms included in the *Book of Common Prayer*), Protestant confirmation rites often contained examinations in basic Christian doctrine and an imposition of hands by the pastor or, in England, the bishop, invoking the continued blessing and strength of the Holy Spirit, recognized as already bestowed in baptism. Such a rite, not considered a sacrament of "initiation" but, increasingly, as a rite of baptismal affirmation or catechetical rite of entrance into adult membership in the Church, functioned as a prerequisite to the reception of First Communion and, as such, actually restored the sequence of the rites that had been not only separated from each other, but also disordered in their sequence in the late medieval period.

The Catholic Reformation of the 16th century did little with Christian initiation at the Council of Trent or in the subsequent liturgical books produced under the authority of that council, in this case the *Pontifical* (1596), containing the rite for confirmation, and the *Rituale Romanum* (1614), containing the rite for baptism. These books did not represent really "reformed" rites but, rather, the codification and uniformity of the sacraments of initiation throughout the Roman Catholic Church as they had come to be celebrated and interpreted. To further the cause of liturgical uniformity, Pope Sixtus V in 1588 established the Congregation of Sacred Rites (later renamed the *Sacred* Congregation of Rites) for the direction of the liturgy throughout the Latin Church, based on uses in Rome itself.

In this way not only was the pattern of Christian initiation in its disordered and separated sequence inherited by the Council of Trent, it was received, defended, advocated, and perpetuated by the Tridentine liturgical books, the same books that continued to shape the Roman Catholic understanding of Christian initiation until the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s. Also, like the Protestant reformers, the Council Fathers at Trent were themselves greatly concerned about catechesis and Christian education and, again like, and, undoubtedly, influenced by the popularity of catechisms written by the Protestant reformers themselves, they called for an official catechism of Catholic teaching entitled the *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests*. This lengthy and detailed catechism (containing

about 600 pages of text in English translation) on the Apostles' Creed in twelve articles, the seven sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Our Father, appeared in 1566. This order of appearance, coming before the publication of any of the liturgical books, is itself indicative of the surpassing value that the Fathers of Trent placed on education, and Mark Searle has noted that Catholics and Protestants alike now believed that "through diligent training of intellect and will ... a new generation of committed individuals could be formed."³⁸

While theological and doctrinal issues continued to divide Catholics and Protestants, especially on the sacramentality of confirmation, in practice they actually differed very little here. Hence, in spite of all the polemics on both sides, both continued to baptize in early infancy and then catechize in preparation for "confirmation," or some other rite named differently, and First Communion. For Roman Catholics the location of confirmation itself in this initiatory sequence would depend upon the availability of bishops and actually varied by region, although the rubrics in the 1596 *Pontifical* still make provision for infants to be held up to the bishop by their sponsors at confirmation.

Even here, however, by not fully initiating people, or at least not permitting them to receive First Communion until they were at the proper age at which they could respond in faith, a greater irony than even the Protestant retention of some of confirmation is the parallel established between Protestants and Catholics with the Anabaptist tradition altogether. Indeed, while Anabaptists might have "dedicated" their children to God in infancy and then baptized, imposed hands, and communed them after catechesis around the age of seven, Protestants and Roman Catholics continued to baptize in infancy, catechize, and only then, by means of "confirmation" or First Communion rites, fully welcome them into membership around the same age. Although there may be a world of difference in the theological claims made about infant baptism, in practice a commonality between these traditions exists that is not often noted. That is, in spite of the theological understanding, all were, in practice, fully initiating only "responsible" and faith-professing "adult" individuals whose intellect and will had been shaped by catechetical education. In other words, except for some isolated instances (such as Latin America, where 16th-century Spanish missionaries often baptized and confirmed in infancy, a practice still operative in some areas there as of the early 21st century,³⁹ infant initiation was not restored in the 16th century.

The Modern Period of Liturgical Reform and Renewal

The modern rites of Christian initiation appearing in the revised worship books of several Christian churches today, much like the shape of those rites in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, display a remarkable degree of ecumenical-liturgical convergence and homogeneity. Such, of course, is not surprising when one considers that much of the same liturgical scholarship that, in Roman Catholic circles in response to the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* in 1963, led to the publication of the current Roman Rite of Christian Initiation (*Rite of Baptism for Children* [1969], *Rite of Confirmation* [1971], and the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* [1972]), also informed both directly and indirectly the current rites of several other Western Christian traditions, including various adaptations of the prebaptismal adult Lenten catechumenal process. Indeed, it is especially the modern recovery and restoration of this adult catechumenate and

adult initiation as a ritual process leading from initial conversion to Christ through catechetical and liturgical formation (often during Lent) and culminating in the rites of baptism, perhaps confirmation, and Eucharist (often at the Easter Vigil) that in the early 21st century is seen by many as constituting a theological and liturgical “norm” for celebration and interpretation.⁴⁰ But even here it is often pointed out that the sequence of the rites assumed by the 1971 Roman Catholic rite for confirmation is that confirmation will come before First Communion, ideally at the canonical age of seven, so that the traditional sequence might be restored. In fact, such restoration of the classic sequence of Christian initiation is being restored in several Roman Catholic dioceses.

The rediscovery and implementation of the adult process for Christian initiation has restored to the rites, at least for adults, that unitary and integral sequence never abandoned in the Christian East, where baptism is followed immediately by “confirmation” and leads into the Eucharistic liturgy and reception of communion. In fact, even the language of the Christian East for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the “Seal of the Holy Spirit,” has become the formula for the confirmation anointing in the Roman Catholic Rite of Confirmation and is used similarly for the postbaptismal anointing or signing in several Protestant baptismal rites. Together with this, the use of chrism has been restored for this anointing in several Protestant traditions, though still somewhat resisted within the Church of England.

In light also of new theological interpretations of original sin, some have argued that infants be enrolled in a type of catechumenate leading to their full initiation only at age seven or later after sufficient catechesis. As a result, the narrative of the fall of Adam and Eve into sin in Genesis 3 has been rescued from its almost biological use as a “proof text” for the reproductive transmission of sin and restored as a paradigm for the universal human condition of sin, a condition overcome by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and celebrated in the rites of Christian initiation. And with this the perceived necessity of *quam primum* baptism based on fear of the consequences of original sin is slowly disappearing.⁴¹

Others, recognizing the “norm” of the process and ritual sequence of initiation in the adult form, contend that if infants of active Christian parents are to be baptized, they are to be initiated fully, including the reception of First Communion at their baptism. It was Mark Searle who best summed up the rationale for restoring the fullness of Christian initiation of young children, when he said:

Far from barring children from the font, the chrism, and the altar, the Church should welcome their participation in these sacraments as a reminder both of the catholicity of the Church and of the fact that, no matter how informed or committed we might be as adults, when we take part in the sacramental liturgies of the Church we are taking part in more than we know.⁴²

Such, in fact, has been increasingly the case within the Episcopal Church in the United States, constituting a norm in some dioceses, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, although among Lutherans it has not yet achieved the status of a norm, with communion reception still often postponed until after catechesis at a later age. Indeed, what may be called the incomplete reform of Christian initiation, as that reform concerns infants, is surely one of the continued agenda items for further study and pastoral implementation in the early 21st century.⁴³

The modern period in the history of Christian initiation is, in many ways, similar to developments in the 4th and 5th centuries of churches borrowing rites across ecclesial boundaries. In the modern period, however, it is the ecumenical-liturgical movement that has been such a strong catalyst for this phenomenon. Such an ecumenical approach to Christian initiation brings with it vast implications for Christian unity as together Christians come to realize more fully what our common baptism signifies for our life together in Christ. As Gordon Lathrop asks in his book, *Holy People*:

If Baptism constitutes the assembly that is the church, ought not the Christians in a given locality enact that truth? Can we not do much of the process of Baptism together? Could a renewed catechumenate be undertaken by many or even all of the Christian assemblies in a given local place? Could we be present at each other's baptisms? Could we do baptisms on the great feasts and do them side by side? Could we even consider constructing a single font for the local churches in our towns and cities?⁴⁴

And as Paul Turner has written:

The ecumenical movement longs for the day when the rites which prepare baptized Christians for full communion will be ripped from our books, and the catechumenate now so freely adapted for the *baptized* may become again the proper province of the unbaptized. ... When the disciples warned Jesus that some who were not of their company were exorcising demons in his name they expected him to put a stop to it. Jesus tolerated strange exorcists with the simplest of aphorisms: "If they're not against us, they're for us." The church tolerates baptisms. Is it too much to ask that we tolerate confirmations as well? Our churches are irresponsibly dawdling toward a common table.⁴⁵

May such questions continue to shape our approach to Christian initiation well into the future.

Historiography

Traditional scholarship on the rites of Christian initiation operated out of several common influential assumptions that are no longer tenable in the early 21st century, namely: (1) that there was a single, monolinear, and original unitive pattern of baptism, "confirmation," and First Communion, celebrated from antiquity at the Easter Vigil (interpreted by a Romans 6 death and burial image) and prepared for by at least a nascent Lent, which, in the course of the Middle Ages, was disrupted and separated into distinct sacraments and ultimately divorced from an "original" connection to Easter; (2) that an important source, such as the *Apostolic Tradition* ascribed to Hippolytus of Rome (c. 215), thanks to the work of Bernard Botte⁴⁶ and Gregory Dix⁴⁷, was actually composed by the early-3rd-century anti-pope Hippolytus himself and thus reflected our earliest and authoritative piece of evidence for reconstructing early initiation practice at Rome; and (3) that any variations to this supposed normative pattern (evident from other early Christian traditions, such as Syria or Egypt) were to be viewed precisely as accidental and unimportant "variations" or idiosyncratic departures from this norm.

In the early 21st century, however, due to a new scholarly and critical read of the

sources, all of these assumption have been, and are increasingly being, revised.⁴⁸ Consequently, the study of early Christian initiation is now viewed, in the words of Paul Bradshaw, as a “study in diversity.”⁴⁹ Rather than a presumed original pattern and agreed upon meaning, scholarship now notes that several initiatory patterns coexisted in early Christianity, with different ritual moments emphasized (e.g., the prebaptismal anointing(s) or the water rite or the postbaptismal anointing(s) or hand-laying, and not all of these elements existed in every rite) as well as differing theological interpretations offered (e.g., baptism as death and burial or baptism as new birth, adoption, sonship, gift of the Holy Spirit, etc.), and even different baptismal occasions celebrated (e.g., Epiphany and Pentecost) within the differing Christian communities. What can be seen in sources from the 4th and 5th centuries, including now the so-called *Apostolic Tradition* itself as redacted at that time, are patterns and theologies that have come to be synthesized and shaped at the great patriarchal sees and as subsequently reflected in the homilies of the great mystagogues (e.g., Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose of Milan) in the aftermath of the legalization of Christianity, the early ecumenical councils, and the subsequent adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.⁵⁰

Contemporary liturgical scholarship has also raised serious questions about the origins and theology of “confirmation.” Regarding the unique Roman custom of the postbaptismal structure of hand-laying with prayer for the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit and subsequent anointing, which came to be reserved to the bishop whether present at baptism or not, modern scholars conclude that in its origins what became “confirmation,” through various historical accidents and developments, was simply the way that the baptismal rite itself was concluded and the Eucharist begun in some communities. To separate it from between baptism and Eucharist, as happened at Rome in the 12th century, or to add it as a separate episcopal rite after baptism, other postbaptismal rites (e.g., foot washing), and the Eucharist, which happened in other churches in the Middle Ages as the Roman rite gained ascendancy, brings with it a whole host of theological and pastoral problems quite incongruent with its origins.⁵¹

Closely related to this is the fact that awareness is growing again, at least in contemporary scholarship, that sacramental confirmation “is not a reaffirmation of a previous baptism; it is not the ritualization of a key moment in the human life cycle. It is, rather the gift of the Spirit *tied intimately to the water-bath* that prepares one for the reception of the body and blood of Christ as a full member of the church.”⁵² For Roman Catholics this new awareness has had two implications, either: (1) that confirmation and First Communion (in that order) simply be restored to baptism in all cases, whether the candidate is an infant, child, or adult, similar to the practice and pattern of the Christian East; or (2) that, at the very least, the traditional “canonical” age of seven be the time at which those baptized in infancy are confirmed and receive First Communion at the same liturgical celebration. If the first is clearly emerging as a general preference among liturgists, liturgical scholars, and within especially the Anglican and Lutheran traditions, the second is, in fact, emerging as the practice in several dioceses in the United States and Canada and will certainly become more frequent in the coming years.

To this question, still debated within some scholarly circles, must be added the modern ecumenical question of a common recognition of “confirmation” as well

as Eucharistic sharing between the churches. In fact, this ecumenical question may well be one of the most important areas of liturgical research on Christian initiation for the future.

Primary Sources

Although no substitute can replace working with primary sources in their original languages, as far as is possible, English-speaking students of Christian initiation are very fortunate to have available to them several collections of primary sources in translation. Such is certainly an indication of the extent of scholarship on Christian initiation in the English-speaking world.

For baptism and confirmation from the Patristic period through the Middle Ages, the standard work remains that of E. C. Whitaker and Maxwell E. Johnson, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*.⁵³ To this should be added the works of Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumate*⁵⁴ and *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt*, together with the English translation of relevant portions of 4th-century baptismal homilies delivered by Ambrose of Milan, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia.⁵⁵ For the period from the 16th-century Protestant and Catholic Reformations until the present day two important collections of source by John Douglas Fischer and Peter J. Jagger should be consulted.⁵⁶ For contemporary sources, the reader is directed to the official liturgical books of the various churches.⁵⁷

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View Christian Initiation Research Papers on Academia.edu for free. This paper analyzes Paul's Christian initiation as the Model for 4th century Christian rites and analyzes Paul's use of language and Luke's theology to understand technical terms such as "calling on the name of the Lord", "filled with the more. The Apostolic Origins of Christian Initiation. Introduction: There are several places in the Bible where Baptism is mentioned. Perhaps the most important is Christ's commission to the Apostles: to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20). The most famous passage from the Epistles on baptism is Romans 6:3-11 which is read in our baptismal ceremony and refers to baptism as joining Christ in his death and burial. Below I give three examples from the Acts of the Apostles of baptismal ceremonies. NOCENT, A., "Christian Initiation During the First Four Centuries", and "Christian Initiation in the Roman Church from the Fifth Century Until Vatican II", in Sacraments and Sacramentals, ed. A.J. Chupungco (Handbook for Liturgical Studies 4), The Liturgical Press (A Pueblo Book), Collegeville MN 2000, 5-48, 49-90 (read with attention to footnotes). JOHNSON, M.E., The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation, Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN 1999, rev. ed. 2007.